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2020-01

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Pathirane , H 2020 , ' Philosophical Hermeneutics and Urban Encounters ' , Open  
pö Philosophy , vol. 3 , no. 1 , pp. 478 492 . <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0136>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/319811>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0136>

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## Philosophy of the City

Henrik Pathirane\*

# Philosophical Hermeneutics and Urban Encounters

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0136>

received March 11, 2020; accepted August 05, 2020

**Abstract:** The paper applies Gadamerian hermeneutics to everyday situations of nonverbal social interaction in the urban space. First, relevant aspects of urban encounters are briefly discussed with philosophical hermeneutics' relation to nonverbal communication and bodily understanding. Second, hermeneutic understanding is presented as conversation, and the ethical implications of hermeneutics are articulated: as philosophical practice, Gadamerian hermeneutics is about intensifying the voice of the other. There is a demand for mutual openness towards otherness. Connected to this attitude required for hermeneutic encounters are the ideas of a cosmopolitan public sphere and an inclusive hermeneutic community. After attending to these, the value of specifically *urban* encounters can be articulated. Urban context and built environment can in good circumstances assist in encountering the other hermeneutically. The passing communicative situations can be negotiations of meanings and values, instances of public sphere. The urban mass society with its crowds has potentiality to enact an inclusive hermeneutic community. To conclude, the consequences of our failures to engage hermeneutically with each other are discussed in a plea for hermeneutic openness.

**Keywords:** Gadamer Hans-Georg, hermeneutic attitude, understanding, *Bildung*, public sphere, urban space, everyday interaction, dialogue, inclusivity, otherness

## 1 Introduction

Okay, eye contact, a pothole, I see you, that is how you roll, the sun is shining, this is how I roll, good for us, watch your step, what are you wearing, I didn't know such a thing exists, not sure it would be for me, but wow, looks good on you, cyclist coming behind you, where does your style draw influence from, what does it remind me of, that bike sure goes fast, why did I initially think you would work in public administration, where do you work, I don't work, thank you, this was something, hope to meet you again; why are those people staring at me from across the street, from so far, what is it, is it me, my clothes, the way I walk, something else, leave me alone, now I feel uncomfortable, God damn it, even the wind is violent, oh, another person, green lights, better hurry, watch for the turning cars, don't run, good day, I will pass you on this side, that tree is old, so is that building, did you notice them, both from the 1890's, are they, oh well, better hurry.

Such thoughts could go through my mind at some point during my daily walk to the university. The way I look has drawn the other person's attention to me, which in turn has drawn my attention to them. Sometimes there is attraction and smiles, and sometimes it is justified to read hostility into the giving and taking of space or angry intensity of the gaze. Most of the encounters could be called functional: "let us not collide." Even in these, there are micropolitical dimensions and predispositions of who should alter their course and who is entitled to walk uninterrupted. Sometimes the encounter is directed towards something in the streetscape – a light that takes too long to change, trash, endless drilling noise from a

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construction site, “I hate this, don’t you?,” or a beautiful evening sky, a recently renovated façade with vibrant colours and striking contrasts, “wow, right?” – and again in some encounters, the dominant tone is a welcoming, mutual curiosity towards the other awoken by a perceived difference. Whatever the subject matter, these situations of (mostly) nonverbal communication can build up to something.

The main point of this paper is fairly simple: our passing encounters with each other are potentially valuable. To illuminate some aspects of worth pertaining to these situations, I will discuss Gadamerian hermeneutics. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, hermeneutic understanding is always conversation, and conversation is shown to be valuable and crucial for our collective life. I argue that our everyday urban situations of interpersonal interaction are to be understood as potential events of hermeneutic conversation even though they most often are ephemeral and nonverbal. The question is not whether they can or cannot possibly be hermeneutic events. Instead, I am interested in what is disclosed by approaching them as having the potentiality of being one. As a consequence, urban encounters – in the sense of often nonverbal, ephemeral face-to-face situations of interaction – are shown to have value perhaps unarticulated before. As hermeneutic encounters, they are also *Bildung*, formative and transformative. They participate in our enculturation and in so doing bind us together into an open community enacted in these encounters and united by mutual gratitude. Furthermore, they can be situations of negotiation where the otherness of others is accepted and respected: they can be instances of inclusive public sphere with genuinely political forces.

Some words to position this paper. A few exceptions notwithstanding, Gadamer has not been applied to the questions of everyday or urban life, at least not to any notable extent.<sup>1</sup> However, at the core of Gadamerian hermeneutics is the continuity and intertwined nature of art, interpretation and the totality of one’s life.<sup>2</sup> Its application to the questions of everyday life is thus not that far-fetched. In relation to the aforementioned continuity, I accept – in my applicative endeavour – the anti-binarist project inherent in Gadamerian hermeneutics. The traditional binaries of subject–object, person–object, self–world, reader–text, reality–appearance, essence–contingence, thought–expression, self–other, individual–social, law–case, general–particular, timeless–historical, past–present, certain–probable, whole–part, literacy–orality, product–process, theory–practice and empirical–normative, conveniently presented as an annotated table by John Arthos, “give way to hermeneutic relations that form in generative tension and reciprocity in an elegantly coordinated system of discursive relations, what Gadamer calls a speculative unity (TM, 469–75).”<sup>3</sup>

Instead of “Gadamer’s hermeneutics,” I denote the referred branch of thought and philosophical practice by “Gadamerian hermeneutics.” The twenty-first century secondary literature on Gadamer, the effective history that affects my understanding of philosophical hermeneutics, often aims to go beyond Gadamer’s originally intended scope, which, of course, is in line with the spirit of Gadamerian (and Gadamer’s) hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics is a hermeneutic discipline connected to a cluster of ideas discussed via Gadamer’s writings existing within the historical world and exposed to its movements of meaning and language. Relatedly, Gadamer himself recovers, applies and appropriates concepts from throughout the western philosophical history. Instead of utilizing the concepts as such, he weaves some of their insights into the key concepts of his hermeneutics. Plato’s *anamnesis* and *methexis*,

<sup>1</sup> Naukkarinen, “Everyday Aesthetic Practices,” discusses Gadamer in relation to tactful behaviour. Ratiu, “Everyday Aesthetic Experience,” frames everyday aesthetics as practical aesthetics by way of analogy drawn from the beginning of Gadamer’s magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (part I. 1.1). Walhof, *The Democratic Theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Chapter 5, applies Gadamer’s conception of friendship and solidarity to civic participation and shows how solidarity fits to describe the Occupy Wall Street movement. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* is subsequently abbreviated as TM.

<sup>2</sup> TM, 60–61. “Every experience is taken out of the continuity of life and at the same time related to the whole of one’s life. It is not simply that an experience remains vital only as long as it has not been fully integrated into the context of one’s life consciousness, but the very way it is ‘preserved and dissolved’ (aufgehoben) by being worked into the whole of life consciousness goes far beyond any ‘significance’ it might be thought to have. Because it is itself within the whole of life, the whole of life is present in it too.”

<sup>3</sup> Arthos, *Speaking Hermeneutically*, xvi.

Aristotle's *phronesis*, the Greek *theoria* and Vico's *sensus communis* are among those reverberating in Gadamer's thinking as well as Heidegger's lifelong influence and the whole tradition of German idealism and romanticism.<sup>4</sup> Different echoes are amplified by different researchers. This paper presents again a new constellation of connections and emphases at the cost of some others.<sup>5</sup>

The article is structured as follows. First, I will briefly clarify my position on and the usage of the term *urban encounter*, then discuss philosophical hermeneutics' relation to nonverbal communication and bodily understanding and point out some relevant aspects of urban encounters. Second, I will present hermeneutic understanding as conversation and from its dialogicality excavate the ethical implications of hermeneutics, the demand for mutual openness to the other. The ideas of a cosmopolitan public sphere and an inclusive hermeneutic community are connected to this attitude required for hermeneutic encounters. After attending to these, the value of specifically *urban* encounters can be articulated. Third, to conclude, I will sum up the results of this exercise and say a couple of words regarding the consequences of our failures to engage hermeneutically with each other (in a plea for hermeneutic openness).

## 2 Nonverbal conversation and urban encounters

Urban encounters are researched not only in fields such as urban studies, sociology, geography, urban planning, communication studies, gender studies and political science, but also in fields such as philosophy, aesthetics and literary studies. Still, the concept of encounter is under-theorized.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, "urban" refers not only to the fact that it is in city streets that these encounters most often occur, but also to the fact that one's knowledge of being in a city, in a place and space where one can expect to encounter strangers and not be alarmed by it, has an effect on the nature of these encounters.<sup>7</sup> I denote by "urban encounters" everyday situations of face-to-face interaction between human agents who are strangers to each other.<sup>8</sup> This is the type of encounter that until recently has received the most attention.<sup>9</sup> In current research, the micropublics of schools and sports clubs with verbal dialogues and debates are a popular research area and more often acknowledged as contexts for encountering the other as an other.<sup>10</sup>

A significant difference compared to many strands of research is found in what counts as an encounter. In this paper, the focus is on the most common urban situations, that is, the nonverbal ones with a minimum of exchange. Most of the literature, classic or contemporary, does not acknowledge these

4 Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism*; Arthos, *Gadamer's Poetics*; 21, 174; TM, part I. 1. 1, for *methexis* 476.

5 One such emphasis is on difference and otherness at the cost of not giving due credit for sameness as the base of all understanding and functional living, that is, the ease of navigation in the world of objects, their connections and other people. The relevance of sameness and the positive value of our predispositions present in Gadamer's thought are left in the background in this paper.

6 Førde, "Enhancing Urban Encounters," 45.

7 Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 128. "An urban situation has been taken as one in which strangers are likely to meet routinely."

8 It would be worthwhile to discuss encounters between a person and an artifact or an animal, but it is not possible in the limits of this paper. Encounters with art and mediated communication are often studied under the term. See e.g. Georgiou, "Urban Encounters," for encounters with graffiti among other forms and Swanton, "Urban Encounters," for encounters with photography.

9 Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, "Everyday Urban Encounters as Stratification Practices," 486.

10 Van Leeuwen, "If We Are *Flâneurs*, Can We Be Cosmopolitan?" 311. For example, such micropublics are studied as the market place (Watson, "The Magic of the Marketplace"); franchised café spaces (Jones et al., "Urban Multiculture"); and participatory initiatives like spaces for theatre exercises and storytelling (Førde, "Enhancing Urban Encounters"). According to Peter Dirksmeier and Ilse Helbrecht, the focus on micropublics is a recent turn of empirical research (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, "Everyday Urban Encounters as Stratification Practices," 487).

as encounters or communicative situations and thus ends up ignoring their potential worth. For example, the gaze – which I would consider as a form of encounter at least when reciprocated, reacted to or acknowledged – is a common theme in the relevant literature. However, it is not studied as communication but, for example, as surveillance or entertainment, and in fact, the culture of urban gaze born in the nineteenth century is seen by Richard Sennett as a stage in the vanishing of public sphere, as inducing people's withdrawal from communication to a role of a mere spectator.<sup>11</sup>

Where the encounters are understood as in this paper, as barely existent situations of nonverbal interaction, the argument tends to go in the Simmelian fashion that because of civil inattention and the *blasé* attitude, there are no such meaningful encounters in the city. We simply pass each other without being affected in any way. Against the *blâse* attitude is the much theorized figure of the *flâneur* that acts as an allegory of modern urban mentality of openness and curiosity. A person with a hermeneutic attitude is closer to this figure. But, even from the viewpoint of *flânerie*, Bart van Leeuwen argues against the potentiality of urban encounters. According to him, people are closed instead of open to interaction even though they might in general be open to experiences in the city: there is a kind of distancing at play in *flânerie*.<sup>12</sup> This paper argues against these views and shows some possibilities of the ephemeral encounters more often deemed as non-encounters.<sup>13</sup>

There are some characteristics of the research and the subject that I accept with small differences. A great deal of the literature using the term *urban encounter* actually limits the discussion to transcultural encounters or identifies them as encounters where at least one party is of some minority group, and according to Dan Swanton, it “is routinely couched in narratives of failure and crisis.”<sup>14</sup> In this paper, the urban context entails that one cannot be sure of another's background, but the people encountering each other might as well unknowingly be very similar. The “urban” connotes a probable difference. Instead of a narrative of failure, this paper is one of hope. Whatever is meant by “difference,” it is a commonplace statement that by encountering it we learn something. For example, Jan Gehl, discussing social sustainability, writes that “[t]he city is seen as serving a democratic function where people encounter social diversity and gain a greater understanding of each other by sharing the same city space.”<sup>15</sup> In this paper, learning is seen as a hoped-for possibility of encounters, which, however, does not happen automatically but requires collective effort. Finally, a large part of the literature focuses on the social rather than the political dimension of the encounters, and when political, conflictual rather than cooperative action or empathetic negotiation.<sup>16</sup> The hermeneutics' point of view discussed in this paper is closer to the latter, empathetic political negotiation, although not neatly fitting on any scale. It is about respectful recognition and negotiation of difference without subsuming it to sameness but at the same time related to a form of community, as will be seen shortly – beginning with some words on hermeneutics and nonverbal communication.

Although I am going beyond Gadamer, it is interesting to note his views on nonverbal communication as conversation. Regarding bodily communication and hermeneutics, Monica Vilhauer shows how, in the first parts of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer implies that our corporeity plays an important part in understanding and that nonverbal, body-to-body communication and understanding are just as genuine hermeneutic processes as the verbal ones, even though towards the end of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer

<sup>11</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 46–7; Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Van Leeuwen, “If We Are *Flâneurs*, Can We Be Cosmopolitan?,” 308, 311.

<sup>13</sup> Important strands of literature acknowledging nonverbal bodily communication in the urban space as meaningful are the ones utilizing affect theory. E.g. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*; Bissell, “Passenger Mobilities.”

<sup>14</sup> Swanton, “Urban Encounters,” 4.

<sup>15</sup> Gehl, *Cities for People*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Bissell, “Passenger Mobilities,” theorizes the nonverbally communicated affective atmospheres in relation to communities and the *social*. Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, “Everyday Urban Encounters as Stratification Practices,” focuses on conflicts and power dynamics. Macauley, “Walking the City,” is an example of the contrary: ideas and beliefs are shared in everyday encounters which makes them necessary for functioning democracy.

values verbal and verbalised understanding above anything. The nonverbal and verbal modes of understanding are left in unresolved tension in *Truth and Method*.<sup>17</sup>

For Gadamer, anything that can be understood is linguistic.<sup>18</sup> The things that enter our world take position in relation to every other thing in it. From this relationality stems the fundamental linguisticity of our world. Spoken languages are ontic instances of this ontological possibility of meaning. “Everything we encounter is already put on the scale of language, even if not yet in explicit words,” Vilhauer writes. For her, the linguisticity of our perception, the understanding as seeing-as, implies that Gadamerian hermeneutics accommodates a view “that we are able to interpret, understand, and articulate body-to-body, without the need of any words at all. Our bodies are able to understand non-verbally.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in what was originally a 1971 radio lecture, *Die Unfähigkeit zum Gespräch*, on “the incapacity of conversation” and its relation to technological advances, Gadamer gives an example of one kind of genuine conversation: “I once observed a military delegation of Finnish officers in a Berlin Hotel who sat around a large table, silent and withdrawn. Between each and his neighbor spanned the broad tundra of their soul’s landscape, like an unbridgeable distance.”<sup>20</sup> This silent being-with-one-another is, for Gadamer, a conversation, whereas a telephone call never succeeds to be one because it lacks the intimacy and nonverbal aspects of face-to-face communication.<sup>21</sup>

Our dialogical understanding can be corporeal still in an additional way. We understand with our bodies the things that cannot be completely verbalized even though they can be described extensively. Embodied understanding has a dimension of learning, of embodied knowledge, that is, of practical know-how cumulated into bodily habits and ways of interpretation that have become habits.<sup>22</sup> Hermeneutic understanding incorporates this sense of corporeal understanding. Gadamer’s demand that understanding is always self-understanding points to this kind of practical knowledge – self-understanding entails knowing how to, say, use machines or expressions; it is *Sichverstehen* as in “knowing one’s way around.”<sup>23</sup>

This paper presents everyday situations of passing intersubjective communication as potential instances of hermeneutic conversation, genuine hermeneutic understanding. The encounters occur between material, embodied agents. They are situations of interaction between agents who have their own perceivable corporeity as well as their sensory, cognitive and associative sensitivities – who are living bodies, soma. The common human condition, our embodied being, both unites and divides us. “Large cosmopolitan cities with their racially and ethnically mixed populations show how the commonality and difference of our bodies are deeply laden with social meaning.”<sup>24</sup> This difference, as it becomes interpretatively partitioned into, e.g. races, ethnicities, genders and classes, is an enabling condition for discrimination and, for instance, urban segregation. But, by being linked to the singularity of our perspective, our bodily difference also participates in enabling hermeneutic understanding and, for that matter, any political action in the Arendtian sense.<sup>25</sup>

17 Vilhauer, “Verbal and Nonverbal Forms of Play,” 176.

18 TM, 470.

19 Vilhauer, “Verbal and Nonverbal Forms of Play,” 166–7.

20 Vessey et al., “The Incapacity for Conversation,” 352.

21 Ibid. “What never happens in a telephone conversation are those experiences through which people foster an intimacy with one another, where step by step they get deeper into the conversation and in the end are so engrossed in it that a community comes into being between the partners in the conversation, a community that can never again be riven. I called the telephone conversation a kind of photographic negative. For the very sphere of touching, of being attentive, in and through which humans come close to one another, becomes numb thanks to the artificial closeness made possible by the [telephone] wire.”

22 See e.g. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

23 TM, 251. “Someone who knows his way around a machine, who understands how to use it, or who knows a trade – granted that there are different norms for purpose-oriented rationality and for understanding the expressions of life or of texts—it still remains true that all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding (*Sichverstehen*: knowing one’s way around). Even understanding an expression means, ultimately, not only immediately grasping what lies in the expression, but disclosing what is enclosed in it, so that one now knows this hidden part also. But this means that one knows one’s way around in it (*sich auskennt*). Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself (*sich versteht*), projecting himself upon his possibilities.”

24 Shusterman, “Bodies in the Streets,” 16–7.

25 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176. In addition, *ibid.*, 214. For Hannah Arendt, one of the reasons why labour is anti-political, and not only non-political, and why modern mass society based on labour is conformist is that labour unifies workers



Urban encounters are situations of interaction, hence situated. They do not occur abstractly in a void, but in a certain place, time and environment – in a specific street corner in a specific city.<sup>26</sup> They involve directly perceivable facets as well as wider contextual ones. Both colour and affect the encounters. These encounters happen in interaction with the environment and are affected by all the different dimensions of the place. In relation to the Gadamerian speculative unity and the accompanying anti-binarist project, the encounters are not only affected by physical and social contexts but have them as dimensions inseparable from the situation. An event of hermeneutic conversation, in the case of urban encounters, fades, most importantly, the borders of self, other, tradition, cultural objects of cities and the contexts of the situation.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in an engaged encounter, all the different aspects of the situation fuse to form a whole.<sup>28</sup>

The agents bring to these situations their own hermeneutic horizons and hermeneutic situations, that is, their own backgrounds, burdens and limitations, their given moment in history with its common valuations and their traditions into which they have grown and from which they hopefully critically interpret the world and which continuously fuse with other traditions. In an encounter, the otherness of oneself is brought into conversation with the otherness speaking through the other. Participation in the conversation involves transformation through stepping out of the self to the space of in-between, the dialogical space created by the conversation (as will be shown shortly).

### 3 Hermeneutic understanding, inclusive public sphere and the city

In Gadamer's usage, *understanding* has two distinct but interlinked meanings. First, it denotes an *existential*, a fundamental and inescapable dimension of being in the world. Seeing is seeing-as. Our being is understanding. All our sensing and perception involve interpretation.<sup>29</sup> We make sense of our surroundings as we go. The second meaning is a refined activity based on the former. *Hermeneutic understanding* denotes an engaged dialogue, quest for grasping what the encountered text, text-analogue or a person has to say and coming to a conclusion. Still, more than this, it is a practice and an attitude, a lifelong endeavour to gain and maintain readiness to understand.

Hermeneutic understanding as experience (*Erfahrung*) is cumulative. For Gadamer, a genuinely experienced person is "someone who is radically undogmatic." Gadamer writes that the "dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself." The result of hermeneutic *Bildung* is a hermeneutic attitude of openness.<sup>30</sup> And this is the crux of hermeneutics: it is a philosophical practice directed towards an attitude

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into sameness: "The sameness prevailing in a society resting on labor and consumption and expressed in its conformity is intimately connected with the somatic experience of laboring together, where the biological rhythm of labor unites the group of laborers to the point that each may feel that he is no longer an individual but actually one with all others."

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Anderson, "Streetwise," 188.

<sup>27</sup> Berleant, "What is Aesthetic Engagement." Arnold Berleant operates with a similarly holistic concept, aesthetic engagement. "It rejects the traditional separations between the appreciator and the art object, as well as between the artist and the performer and the audience. It recognizes that all these functions overlap and merge within the aesthetic field, the context of appreciation. The customary separations and oppositions between the functions of artist, object, appreciator, and performer disappear in the reciprocity and continuity of appreciative experience." See also Berleant, "On Getting along Beautifully" for *aesthetic engagement* applied to situations of social interaction.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, and Böhme, "Synesthesia in a Phenomenology of Perception." In aesthetics, these questions are discussed for example in connection to Berleant's concepts of *aesthetic engagement* (see fn 15) and *aesthetic field*, as well as Gernot Böhme's *atmosphäre*, atmosphere. See also Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body* for a somaesthetics' account of the human bodily being as both the subject and object.

<sup>29</sup> TM, 79.

<sup>30</sup> TM, 350.

of critical openness. In what follows, I will present understanding as conversation and tease out the meaning and mutuality of “openness” and, consequently, the ethics inherent in philosophical hermeneutics. I will argue that cities, the urban context with masses of people, can assist in fulfilling this ethical demand of openness towards otherness.

Gadamerian hermeneutics has been linked to conservatism – erroneously in my view. James Risser, referring to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer, writes: “Hermeneutics in all its forms has been taken to be nothing more than a convalescence with respect to the sickness of home, i.e., a nostalgia for what was once familiar.” Especially in Gadamer’s case, the accused nostalgia is often connected to conservatism.<sup>31</sup> Nostalgia, or a conservative longing to a mythical place of sameness, knowability, familiarity, harmony, security and predictability, or a theory that sees life and understanding, or a life of understanding, as a process of making things familiar, of domesticating what is strange and of making same what is other would not be a fruitful point of departure for theorizing urban situations of interaction as possible hermeneutic encounters and inclusive value negotiations; they would not be negotiations of meaning in conversation but (maybe mutual) attempts of subjugation and conquest.

Risser argues against both interpreting Gadamer’s hermeneutics as nostalgic and seeing it as conservative. As a historical process, hermeneutic understanding is saving or retrieving rather than conserving, and, according to Risser, the accusations derive partly from misidentifying the hermeneutical project with Hegel’s. Hermeneutic understanding is convalescence, but one needs to be careful to grasp the relevant aspects of the metaphor. Convalescence is not permanent healing. Risser describes hermeneutic understanding as a constant process of convalescence, unending series of situations where the unknown is brought into contact with the known, with one’s life and language. In hermeneutics, however, there is no progress, no permanent overcoming of strangeness and taming the world. Rather, hermeneutic understanding is convalescence “from the broken wounds that remain as the permanent condition of living language and historical life.” Hermeneutic understanding is “a recovery in which there is no pretense about a full recovery.”<sup>32</sup> Hermeneutic understanding does not, and cannot, include Hegelian progression towards “home.”<sup>33</sup> It is not about overcoming strangeness. Instead, it includes a conviction to preserve, perceive and intensify otherness.

Relatedly, philosophical hermeneutics’ disposition towards the other and otherness is that of gratitude and respect.<sup>34</sup> Hermeneutic understanding is always self-understanding in the sense of knowing one’s way around better.<sup>35</sup> It is not directed to the formation of the self per se but to the process of understanding itself and to the otherness or difference needed for and created in understanding. The gained self-understanding is perhaps only a by-product created by the difference to oneself made possible and required by understanding’s dialogical nature. Hermeneutic understanding could be described as metaunderstanding. Nicholas Davey writes:

Understanding is the process of coming to understand that when we understand, we understand differently. Understanding is not only dependent upon but makes a difference. The difference between what we once understood and now understand is itself understood. As a result, our understanding of ourselves, of our past, and of the world we find ourselves in, acquires new coordinates and reconfigures itself accordingly.<sup>36</sup>

Hermeneutic understanding is always dialogical; it is always conversation. The interlocutors step into a situation that requires mutual commitment – hermeneutic understanding is mutual understanding. It

<sup>31</sup> Risser, *The Life of Understanding*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 16–8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 18–9. “One can state this position more strongly: in hermeneutic convalescence there is paradoxically the overcoming of the very idea of overcoming, and in this overcoming hermeneutic convalescence opposes the specifically modern idea of progress as the idea of a true and permanent advance.”

<sup>34</sup> Schmidt, “Respecting Others,” 359; “[R]especting the otherness of the other is a central requirement for understanding in philosophical hermeneutics and has featured prominently in Gadamer’s thinking from the beginning.”

<sup>35</sup> TM, 251.

<sup>36</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 8.



necessitates two parties trying to listen and understand each other and trying to make the conversation understandable for the other. The meaning of every word is negotiated, but it is done by “expropriation of one’s own meaning,” by making space for the other’s meaning rather than holding on to one’s own. Again, understanding is understanding differently, and it is achieved only with the help of others.<sup>37</sup>

There is always a certain resistance in a hermeneutic conversation that stems from our relation to words: they tend to become our own and we tend to cling to their meanings. The same difficulty – resistance of meaning – that is between interlocutors in face-to-face negotiation characterizes our critical-dialogical engagement with tradition. Here, the differences between past and present conceptions, the “hermeneutical differential,” as Davey calls it, “keeps the question of the nature of that subject matter open” guaranteeing the difficulty and simultaneously the possibility of understanding.<sup>38</sup>

The ethics inherent in Gadamerian hermeneutics stems from the dialogicality. Due to the difficulty and conversational reciprocity of hermeneutic understanding, it requires a comportment between interlocutors that Vilhauer calls “the double openness of an ethical friendship,” which, keeping the urban everyday encounters in mind, does not have to be more than some “minimal comportment of openness toward one another – a minimal level of respect for each other” for the dialogue to take place.<sup>39</sup> In sum, a kind of openness is required from both of the interlocutors. Vilhauer writes in relation to the “ethical” side:

A care for the Other’s understanding goes hand in hand with a care for truth, and a genuine friendship with the Other goes hand in hand with a friendship with wisdom (*philosophia*). What we understand as an ethical friendship must include both interlocutors’ reciprocal care for each other, and their mutual care for “the good.”<sup>40</sup>

Gadamer posits “openness” at the centre of both hermeneutic understanding and collective human life. These two are linked – what is “true” and what is “good” intertwine here. He points towards the ethical disposition of philosophical hermeneutics (a theme he subsequently revisits often) in a passage in *Truth and Method* describing the kind of I–Thou relationship that characterizes hermeneutic understanding:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another. [...] Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to.<sup>41</sup>

Now we see the meaning of “openness” and its relevance to hermeneutics. Approaching the other with openness denotes a hermeneutic attitude. First, the other is recognized as another equal subject and interlocutor in the quest for understanding, as an other who has something meaningful, new, different to say. Second, the other is met with respect and willingness to engage in a dialogue. Third, the other is met with a willing readiness to question one’s predispositions, “with a readiness for the Other to teach us something new – something true – about our world and ourselves and, thus, affect our way of thinking in a meaningful way.”<sup>42</sup> Vilhauer calls these conditions of hermeneutic attitude “ethical” because, among other reasons, they require a shared commitment and “ultimately provide for a process in which mutual human growth can occur, making them I–Thou relations that are ultimately *directed toward our common human good*.”<sup>43</sup> This mutual human growth is tied to the idea of *Bildung*.

Philosophical hermeneutics locates our reciprocal indebtedness to this dependence on each other. The dialogical space of the in-between necessary for hermeneutic understanding is to be regarded as a gift

<sup>37</sup> Risser, *The Life of Understanding*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Vilhauer, “Gadamer’s Ethics of Play,” 102.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>41</sup> TM, 354–5. See also, e.g. Gadamer, “The Enigma of Health,” 82.

<sup>42</sup> Vilhauer, “Gadamer’s Ethics of Play,” 83.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 76–7.

given by the other, a space that would not exist without the other and without which no unseen possibilities, no potential alternatives to perceiving the linguistic connections of worldly things would be graspable. On the other hand, when I gain distance to my previous horizons in this space, when I become other to myself and when I am suspended in a prolonged stay between what I knew and what I will know, I also “become more other to the other,” allowing my interlocutor also to attain unseen perspectives. The gift is reciprocal, as Davey notes. “Philosophical hermeneutics evidently assigns a dignity to difference and contends that the differential space of the in-between has its genesis in the processes of hermeneutical encounter, which invites us to allow those who see things differently to enlarge our world.”<sup>44</sup>

Hans-Herbert Kögler develops the hermeneutic space towards its political potential. In addition, he theorizes hermeneutic attitude further in connection to what he calls the cosmopolitan public sphere. The cosmopolitan public sphere is to be understood as an inclusive and transnational sphere of value negotiation that is separate from the state or the society and not connected to any institutions.<sup>45</sup> The effects of these value negotiations are not necessarily in the form of direct political action or influence. Rather, the public sphere operates by introducing “a new scope or framework, a new dimension of assessing what, who, and how something is going to be taken into account concerning the issues at stake.”<sup>46</sup> It is about expanding the field of perceived possibilities of what and how we even can discuss, what we possibly can value and how it can show and be communicated.<sup>47</sup>

The cosmopolitan public sphere is made possible by the conditions of hermeneutic attitude, which, as Kögler frames it, are basic human qualities that have enabled our primary self-formation through social learning.<sup>48</sup> They are the capabilities “of (1) empathetically understanding another concretely situated human agent, of (2) respecting another human agent as entitled and worthy of the same rights and resources as oneself, and of (3) being able to critically question and challenge generally accepted notions and beliefs.”<sup>49</sup> These hermeneutic capabilities – dialogical perspective-taking, mutual respect and critical reflexivity, in other words, willingness to participate in a dialogue, openness towards otherness and readiness to question predispositions offered by tradition – are evidently comparable to what can be found in Gadamer’s I–Thou relationship.

The cosmopolitan, or transnational, element in Kögler’s formulation resonates with my aims in approaching urban encounters through philosophical hermeneutics. For Kögler, the establishment of a global public sphere is dependent on the participating agents’ ability to partly step out of their respective traditions (here Kögler also shows the clearly political dimension of a hermeneutic conversation).

A reflexive self-construction of a global public sphere has to (1) thematize the objective processes of power that define its background context, and (2) to utilize the self-distancing potential that intercultural dialogue provides to unearth the old and new forms of power that inhere in the involved cultural and national contexts.<sup>50</sup>

The relevance of the urban context can now be articulated. Hermeneutic practice is about becoming sensitive to otherness and about strengthening the voice of the other. For Kögler, it is the transnational context that intensifies the other’s voice – replacing the role works of art play in Gadamer’s thinking. I give

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<sup>44</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Kögler, “Hermeneutic Cosmopolitanism,” 231–2. Kögler’s conception of the cosmopolitan public sphere refers primarily to transnational dialogue through different media, where participants are not necessarily physically in the same location but can be anywhere in the world.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>47</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*; 48–9. In a similar vein, Davey discusses the formative and transformative capacities of language: “Citizenship of a hermeneutic *civitas* is made possible by the formative capacity of language to generate “speech worlds” that transcend the indigenous horizon of any speaker. The transformative capacity of language effects changes in our self-understanding, and changes in our comportment toward a subject matter can change the form of how that subject matter is communicated.”

<sup>48</sup> Kögler, “Hermeneutic Cosmopolitanism,” 234–5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

this function of intensification of otherness to the urban context. For, on the most obvious level, in large cities, one cannot be sure of any shared background in values, narratives or language. Assumptions of shared citizenship or of shared local identity are not justified. The encounters and value negotiations are on a potentially global level. Thus, the urban context acts as an encouraging, amplifying factor to question the preconceptions of one's tradition, one's "cultural and national contexts," and to encounter the other without assimilating their otherness. Here, as in Kögler's argumentation, hermeneutic attitude goes hand in hand with inclusivity.<sup>51</sup>

As philosophical practice, philosophical hermeneutics is directed towards inclusivity, towards reaching a habit of hermeneutic attitude required for conversation and value negotiations. I will conclude this chapter by focusing on the urban everyday encounters. I will begin, however, with a detour of discussing hermeneutic *Bildung* in order to bridge Kögler's cosmopolitan public sphere and Gadamerian hermeneutic community: they are both oriented towards inclusivity and created by and between those who venture into the open.<sup>52</sup> Urban everyday encounters, when hermeneutic, are not only negotiations but also, through the hermeneutic character of these negotiations, enact and create an inclusive community.

Risser frames hermeneutic understanding as a form of *Bildung*, and as such it has to do with the concept of community and a kind of social self-formation that does not assimilate others.<sup>53</sup> The Gadamerian concept of participation is at work here. It is the same participation discussed previously, the participation in such a dialogue that grants the participants distance from themselves and participation in a hermeneutic event enabled by a mutual hermeneutic attitude. Both participants are directed towards the subject matter of the conversation and to the viewpoints the other conveys and enables.<sup>54</sup> It is this non-assimilative participation that gives the hermeneutic community its characteristic inclusivity.<sup>55</sup> Risser writes:

This idea of participation that does not erase the difference in the voice of the other necessarily structures hermeneutic *Bildung* in terms of an idea of community – not as a commonality under a concept of identity that arises with the formation of a "we," but as an exercising or enacting of life together. It is a community defined neither by inter-subjectivity, which is the doubling of what is already one's own, nor agreement, understood here in a pure and simple way as assimilation into identity, but by the response and responsibility that accompanies the words that are addressed by one to another.<sup>56</sup>

A hermeneutic encounter is formative and transformative. In this sense, an open community, the hermeneutic *civitas*, is that of "border crossers," a community of those who have stepped into the dialogical space of in-between. It is a community of those who have become open to being other to themselves through linguistic interaction and fusion of perspectives with others. And, again, it is a community of those who recognize their dependence on others. *Bildung*, or more specifically, becoming *gebildet*, "is not a matter of attaining a level of culture but of attaining the ability to be responsive to, to adapt to, and to pass between different cultural borders. [...] Becoming *gebildet* is, in effect, the venture of living within, hazarding, and responding to the cross currents of ideas (subject matters) that flow across linguistic and cultural borders."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. For Kögler, the hermeneutic capacities, as basic human qualities, do not guarantee the inclusivity or global reach of the public sphere but only enable it.

<sup>52</sup> *Bildung* encompasses such translations as self-formation, enculturation, education and culture.

<sup>53</sup> Risser, *The Life of Understanding*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> TM, 180. "From language we learn that the subject matter (Sache) is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding (Sichverstehen), but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself." One key feature of Gadamerian hermeneutics is the centrality of the "subject matter," which cannot be discussed here in the expanse it deserves. Likewise, the depth of participation in Gadamerian hermeneutics cannot be elaborated here. *Participation* is where subject-object and part-whole binaries are eradicated. See Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Risser, *The Life of Understanding*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>57</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 48–9.

Returning to the situated character of urban encounters: urban encounters are corporeal situations affected by the social characteristics of the city, by the atmosphere and by the sensory, spatial and aesthetic dimensions of the place. A stimulating urban environment can demand to be discussed, and, thus, participates in maintaining an attitude of openness between people. It can act the same way as a work of art that gathers a hermeneutic community and around which the dialogical space, the public sphere spans.<sup>58</sup> This implies that urban planners, municipal workers and politicians have a chance and a responsibility to imagine, build, support and maintain a city that fosters mutual hermeneutic attitude and situations of interaction between strangers.<sup>59</sup> They share part of the responsibility of hermeneutic *Bildung*. One goal for them could be to preserve and present the historical layers – the texture of ideas and styles, vistas to past and alternative or utopian ways of life – as well as the plurality of contemporary functions, meanings, discourses and values. Society and cities are so much more than real-estate investment strategies and consumerist-capitalist market places.

In addition, as I argued in connection to Kögler's formulations, the urban context can intensify responsiveness to otherness by its evident multicultural plurality and defining feature of dense gathering of strangers in one, albeit vast, location. This intensification requires assisting from the built environment. A walkable city that brings people into contact with each other, a liveable city with places to linger and with non-hostile, non-oppressive public spaces goes far. A welcoming city surely aids us in being receptive and welcoming towards others. With parks and places of relative quietude, possibilities of escaping traffic noise, exedras and other recesses, with squares and wide enough sidewalks, we have a better chance to meet each other's eye with a hermeneutic attitude and to pursue hermeneutic understanding in daily life.

Our daily urban encounters are relatively anonymous, fleeting and as individual situations almost non-existent. Maybe they should not be considered as separate situations but as an interlinked whole. Marie Fleming criticizes Gadamer that for him subjects are vessels for the voices of traditions to converse on some subject matter, meaning that he does not respect or recognize the situatedness of subjects, that they are interchangeable to others.<sup>60</sup> Risser's studies on the importance of the other, partly presented in this paper, should counter this criticism. Still, without accepting the charge in general, in the case of everyday encounters, there is a certain interchangeability of interlocutors.<sup>61</sup> In these passing nonverbal conversations, one passer-by can pull us into the space of negotiation; offer a glimpse of some belief, tradition or a web of connections and hierarchies, of some perspective distant from ours; and initiate a conversation on some subject matter. Just to vanish behind a corner. We are out in the open, pulled partly apart from our native horizon – and another passer-by comes. A new conversation begins, but, for us, it fuses with the previous one. And this goes on. The spontaneity of hermeneutic understanding is highlighted, as is the unknowability of the formative and transformative results. Such a continuing disperse conversation would be a positive interpretation of and possibility for our life in mass societies, so often seen as the death of the individual and the antithesis of genuine I-Thou relationships.<sup>62</sup> As for the subject matter, one thing present for a continuous conversation is the city itself: its historical-cultural and

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<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 51; Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>59</sup> Gens, "The Configuration of Space through Architecture," 164–5. Gadamer can also be interpreted to have acknowledged the ethical and political dimensions of architecture. Buildings, by shaping the space, shape the whole human life and world. See also e.g. Hamelink, "Urban Conflict and Communication;" Gehl, *Cities for People*.

<sup>60</sup> Fleming, "Gadamer's Conversation," 116.

<sup>61</sup> For discussion, see Murphy, "The Dangers of 'Pure Feeling'."

<sup>62</sup> See e.g. Fairfield, *Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterpreted*, Chapter 3, specifically 56–8. Fairfield discusses Gabriel Marcel's existentialist criticism of mass societies in connection to Gadamer's I-Thou relationship. According to Fairfield, Gadamerian hermeneutic attitude and Gadamer's "concrete, non-hyperbolic and non-nostalgic" conception of social life provides a chance for genuine encounters with other people in contemporary societies where, according to Fairfield and Marcel, such encounters have become rare. *Contra* Fairfield, I see more possibilities than threats in crowds and mass societies. With hermeneutic attitude, the mass could be experienced as a community of Thous. Furthermore, I see a need for the idea of anonymity of urban crowds to be divorced from the anonymity of technology, capitalism or statistics. In the former, there is face-to-face interaction.

aesthetic dimensions, usability and functioning of the built environment and life in common in given urban reality.

To summarize, the role played by the urban context is one reason why I discuss specifically “urban” encounters. Perhaps it is not that rare that urban encounters succeed in being hermeneutic events of understanding. Urban lifestyle, being in daily contact with strangers, contributes to hermeneutic understanding. In addition, by discussing the “ethical” in Gadamerian hermeneutics and Kögler’s formulation, we have come to see what is at stake in situations of hermeneutic understanding and hermeneutically attuned conversations. They are, or can be, ethical or political value negotiations on a potentially transnational scale. This is connected to, first, building an open human community based on difference – not sameness – through our everyday demeanour and actions and, second, to the functioning of a public sphere in globalizing mass societies. Written between lines is a hope of reclaiming the urban space from consumerism by way of paying attention to our pedestrian encounters and by way of directing attention to the value of these encounters.

## 4 Conclusion

In *Limits of State Action*, written in the 1790s and published posthumously in 1852, Wilhelm von Humboldt sees the pursuit of *Bildung*, self-formation, for its own sake as humanity’s highest goal.<sup>63</sup> In von Humboldt’s view, *Bildung* requires social bonds, which in turn require *Bildung*. The aesthetic *Bildung* that is free from ulterior motivations is thus linked to collective life, citizenry and political participation. David Sorkin writes, “For Humboldt there is an internal moral imperative, then, which makes *Bildung* become the basis of politics.”<sup>64</sup> Gadamer’s view is akin to Humboldt’s: *Bildung* requires social bonds – agents’ mutual willingness to converse and respectful hermeneutic attitude – which in turn require *Bildung*.<sup>65</sup> The reciprocity and dialogicality of hermeneutic understanding were shown to be the locus of the ethical dimension of philosophical hermeneutics. My view, presented in this paper, is that the urban context and our daily encounters participate in our hermeneutic training towards openness and potentially enact and create an inclusive hermeneutic community, hermeneutic *civitas*, through instantiations of a cosmopolitan public sphere with the accompanying negotiations of value and meaning.

We, as habitants or visitors, interact with each other daily in the urban space. Interaction involves communication of meanings and values. Where there is meaningful communication, there is some kind of understanding. In regard to this understanding being genuine hermeneutic understanding, the situation being hermeneutic conversation enabled by mutual hermeneutic attitude, we often fail. In our daily life, in situations of interaction we seldom are hermeneutically open to otherness. Work and family-related thoughts and chagrins, mobile phones and podcasts or music from headphones, cold winter weather and general tiredness – these are some subjective, particular reasons for failure that affect particular situations. These are missed opportunities, the occurrence of which can be diminished. They are also partly inevitable. On the upside, sometimes we succeed.

The understanding that takes place in urban interpersonal interaction is likely not any concluding understanding of some subject matter. Rather, it is metaunderstanding made possible by a dialogical space born around and from some subject matter. Hermeneutic understanding in urban encounters means

<sup>63</sup> von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Sorkin, “Wilhelm von Humboldt,” 68–9.

<sup>65</sup> Arthos, “Who Are We and Who Am I?” 15, 30–1. Arthos attributes the social element of Gadamerian *Bildung* to being inherited from Luther and Schleiermacher. “Thus Schleiermacher connects the traditional preoccupation of *Bildung* with sociality, a characteristic which he retrieves from Luther, and it is this characteristic which Gadamer appropriates and raises to the level of ontology.” According to Arthos, even though Gadamer gives priority to the sharedness of our being, being “we,” he never completely disavows the individual. A fruitful tension is left in his thinking that enables the non-assimilation of the other as well as the openness of the “social” while emphasizing the communal origins of the event of being.

understanding what is needed for understanding: other people, dialogue and critical relation to tradition. The dialogue takes place between the whole community of “border crossers,” enacted within a web of ephemeral encounters. Furthermore, the created dialogical space of prolonged and shared distance from self is an inclusive one. In such an open space of in-between, what come to be negotiated with uncountable gazes, leanings and nods and navigations and crossings of personal spaces are the values and meaning of the community, that is, humanity, itself.

This paper has gone beyond the descriptive in its demand for mutual hermeneutic attitude. A couple of words on this should be said. First, philosophical hermeneutics always implies or directly presents the same demand. It is important to note that my demand is not solely directed towards people in their everyday life but also towards professional educators and people in charge of our physical environment. Second, the consequences of our closedness are known, they can be severe and they are real. Linked to the absence of hermeneutic attitude are the “bunker architecture” of contemporary cities and gated communities mirroring varying omnipresent yet vague fears of strangers and strangeness.<sup>66</sup> The fears, the diffuse “liquid fear,” being without a real target localize on those who look strange.<sup>67</sup> The processes related to seeing someone rather than some other as strange are not ahistorical but are, to a large extent, initially conditioned by our traditions and various politically and economically motivated campaigns of propagandist fiction directed at rendering, for example, the native peoples of Americas, African-Americans, Sami peoples of Northern Europe or the Aboriginal Australians as strange, less-than-human or monstrously other.<sup>68</sup> Hermeneutic attitude and *Bildung* are needed for “un-suturing,” i.e. coming to question and let go of the inequality-generating prejudgements that can be attached to affects that manifest as deep-rooted bodily reactions to others.<sup>69</sup> They are needed for understanding and positive valuation of difference.<sup>70</sup> For, the difference on which the fears localize is the very thing that enables political action, conversation and understanding, the very thing that, according to Arendt, makes us human.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Shaw, *Posthuman Urbanism*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Bauman, “Liquid Fear;” Ahmed, “Who Knows?”

<sup>68</sup> See e.g. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*; Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*; Ahmed, “This Other and Other Others;” and Watson, “Insatiable Appetites.”

<sup>69</sup> Yancy, “White Embodied Gazing,” 254. “The terms “sutured” and “un-sutured,” as I deploy them here, are not only practices that respectively occlude change and engender change, but they are also indicative of what it means to be a human subject at all, that is, indicative of what it means to be homo possibilitas (un-sutured) and to be thrown within the context of historical facticity (sutured). In other words, to be a subject is indicative of what it means to be “subjected to” or “constituted by,” and indicative of what it means to resist certain forms of being “subjected to,” “constituted by” or interpellated.”

<sup>70</sup> Mandoki, “Letters on the Aesthetic Deformation of Man.” Katya Mandoki assigns aesthetic education a role in preventing hatred and terrorism. “Aesthetic education should therefore begin with and emphasize the development of sensibility in the broader sense of the term: as receptivity to others, to oneself, to life and the world.” This receptivity is not that far from hermeneutic attitude.

<sup>71</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.



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